

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
AID-05 EUR-12 NEAE-00 IO-13 /095 W
-----004682 091149Z /43

P R 091056Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8335
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
USLO RIYADH
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 3331

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, PEPR, SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY DEBATE

1. SUMMARY: ON MAY 29 PRIMIN HALABI REITERATED ASSAD'S FOREIGN POLICY STRESSING THE NEED FOR ARAB UNITY REGARDLESS OF MARGINAL DIFFERENCES AND FOR INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS WITH THE WEST TO SWAY WORLD OPINION. THE STATEMENT WAS CRITICIZED, FOR THE MOST PART BY COMMUNIST DEPUTIES, ON VARIOUS GROUNDS. NONE OF THIS WAS A NEW DEPARTURE, BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME THE SYRIAN PRESS WAS PERMITTED TO AIR THE DEBATE, OR PARTS OF IT, IN PUBLIC. ASSAD MAY HOPE HIS PEOPLE WILL DRAW A COMPARISON BETWEEN THEIR LOT AND SADAT'S RECENT MEASURES AGAINST LEFTISTS, RIGHTISTS, AND THE PRESS. END SUMMARY.

2. ON MAY 29, PRIMIN HALABI OUTLINED HIS GOVERNMENT'S
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PROGRAM BEFORE THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL. THE BULK OF HIS STATEMENT DEALT WITH DOMESTIC CONCERNS AS IS BEFITTING THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS. NEVERTHELESS, HIS REMARKS ON FOREIGN POLICY, WHICH MOST CERTAINLY WERE CLEARED BY PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD RAISED NUMEROUS QUESTIONS IN THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL. ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS AND COMMENTS MADE TO POLOFF BY PEOPLE'S COUNCIL MEMBERS,

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WERE RAISED:

1) THE STATEMENT WAS NOT CLEAR IN IDENTIFYING ENEMIES AND FRIENDS. (IN FACT, THE STATEMENT SPOKE OF "BOOSTING THE RELATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP AND COOPERATION WITH THE SOVIET UNION AND THE REST OF THE SOCIALIST COUNTRIES" WHILE IT SPECIFIED THAT SYRIA " HAS RELATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP AND COOPERATION" WITH WESTERN EUROPE. THE IMPLICATION DRAWN BY SOME PEOPLE'S COUNCIL MEMBERS WAS THAT SYRIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION WERE ON THE SAME PLATEAU OR EVEN A LOWER ONE THAN HER RELATIONS WITH WESTERN EUROPE.)

2) THE STATEMENT MADE NO REFERENCE TO SADAT'S "CAPITULATIONIST LINE." (IT DID NOT EXPLICITLY MAKE A REFERENCE TO SADAT, BUT IT SPOKE OF OPPOSING ANY "DEFEATIST POLICY WHICH AIMS AT A) LIQUIDATING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION, B) AFFIRMING THE OCCUPATION, AND C) DIVIDING THE ARABS. NEVERTHELESS, GIVEN THE FLOOD OF DAILY ANTI-SADAT EDITORIALS THE STATEMENT'S RETICENCE CAME AS A SURPRISE TO SOME MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL.)

3) IS THERE ANY FEAR OF IMPERIALISM, SINCE THE STATEMENT DID NOT ALLUDE TO IT? (ACTUALLY THE STATEMENT USED THE TERM IMPERIALISM ONCE BUT GIVEN THE USUAL RHETORIC THE QUESTIONER IS JUSTIFIED IN WONDERING ABOUT HALABI'S PRESENTATION.)

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4) THE STATEMENT DID NOT ALLUDE TO THE "FRONT OF STEADFASTNESS" AND TO THE NEED FOR ITS EXPANSION. (THIS IS A SUBTLE BUT IMPORTANT DISTINCTION: THE STATEMENT TALKED ABOUT "EXPANDING THE BASE OF CONFRONTATION AND STEADFASTNESS" IN LOWER CASE TERMS, BUT DID NOT MENTION THE UPPER CASE "FRONT.")

5) THE COMMENTS ABOUT OVERLAPPING INTERESTS IN THE PREFACE OF THE INTERNATIONAL POLICY CHAPTER DOES NOT GIVE A TRUE PICTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION AND THE ROLE OF IMPERIALISM. SYRIA NEEDS TO DECLARE ITS STAND IN THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST FRONT. (WE THINK THAT IN EFFECT THAT HALABI WAS SAYING WAS THAT SYRIA IS PART OF AN INTER-RELATED WORLD AND CANNOT ISOLATE ITSELF.)

6) OTHER QUESTIONS RAISED SUBJECTS WHICH THE STATEMENT IGNORED INCLUDING: A) SOUTHERN LEBANON, B) ERITREA, C) RELATIONS WITH IRAQ, AND D) THE PROPOSED ARAB SUMMIT.

3. FONMIN KHADDAM DEFENDED THE STATEMENT FROM ITS CRITICS. REGARDING SADAT'S DEFEATIST POLICY AND THE QUESTION OF

STEADFASTNESS, KHADDAM SAID THAT A CAREFUL READING OF THE STATEMENT WOULD SHOW THAT IT PERPETUATED THE COUNTRY'S CONSISTENT POLICY. THIS ANSWER, WE ARE TOLD, WAS LITTLE COMFORT TO THE MINORITY WHO FELT THAT BY STRESSING ARAB UNITY ABOVE MARGINAL DIFFERENCES AND BY IGNORING THE STEADFASTNESS FRONT, THE GOVERNMENT WAS PREPARING THE GROUND FOR CONTINUED ALIGNMENT WITH ARAB MODERATES. THIS ANXIETY WAS HEIGHTENED BY KHADDAM'S STATEMENT THAT "NO NEW DEVELOPMENTS HAVE OCCURRED IN THE SITUATION EXISTING BETWEEN US AND THE IRAQI REGIME OWING TO THE POLICIES OF THAT REGIME. ALGERIAN AND OTHER EFFORTS HAVE NOT SUCCEEDED IN INDUCING BAGHDAD RULERS TO JOIN THE STEADFASTNESS FRONT."

4. KHADDAM DEFENDED THE STATEMENT'S POSITION ON OVER-CONFIDENTIAL

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LAPPING INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS AND THE NEED TO DEAL WITH THEM BY CITING THE SOVIET UNION'S POLICY OF SEEKING INTERNATIONAL DETENTE. HE ADDED: "OUR RESISTANCE TO THE AMERICAN SCHEME AND TO IMPERIALIST POLICY AND OUR REPULSING IT THROUGHOUT THE ARAB HOMELAND, AND THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES WE HAVE ENDURED IN THIS REGARD IS SOMETHING THAT CANNOT BE CONCEALED, FOR PLACING A FINGER OVER AN EYE CLOSES THE EYE BUT DOES NOT HIDE THE SUN."

5. IN ADDITION, KHADDAM GAVE A DETAILED EXPLANATION OF EVENTS IN LEBANON AND SYRIA'S REACTION TO THEM WHICH CONTAINED NOTHING THAT WAS NEW.

6. HALABI'S STATEMENT DID NOT REPRESENT A NEW COURSE FOR SYRIAN POLICY IN SPITE OF MEMBERS' CRITICISMS. IT REITERATED MUCH OF WHAT PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD SAID IN BRIEFER TERMS IN HIS MARCH 8 STATEMENT BEFORE THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL. EVEN THE CRITICISMS WERE NOT PARTICULARLY NEW: WE HAVE HEARD THEM FROM PEOPLE'S COUNCIL MEMBERS, PARTICULARLY COMMUNIST MEMBERS, BEFORE. WHAT WAS UNIQUE ABOUT THIS RECENT EXERCISE WAS THAT THE CRITICISMS WERE PUBLISHED IN THE PRESS AND THAT DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ARE BEING AIRED. ASSAD SEEMS TO BE TRYING TO BREATHE A LITTLE LIFE INTO POPULAR PERCEPTION OF HIS PEOPLE'S COUNCIL AND HIS PRESS. SADAT'S RECENT MOVES AGAINST PARTIES AND THE PRESS MAY HAVE ENCOURAGED ASSAD TO TRY TO HIGHLIGHT A CONTRAST FOR HIS DISGRUNTLED OR APATHETIC POPULACE. IN ANY EVENT, HALABI'S STATEMENT HIGHLIGHTS ONCE AGAIN SYRIA'S PROCLIVITY TO STRIKE A MORE MODERATE LINE IN OFFICIAL OR PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENTS THAN IS PROJECTED BY IMMODERATE EDITORIAL ATTACKS ON ALL COMERS WITH SADAT, IRAQ, ISRAEL, AND THE US IN THE LEAD. PELLETREAU

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ARABS, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, MEETING PROCEEDINGS, CENTRAL LEGISLATURE, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 09 jun 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC03331
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780241-0522
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780678/aaaacosw.tel
Line Count: 167
Litigation Code IDs:
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Litigation History:
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Message ID: a9e7c58c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2422081
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY DEBATE
TAGS: PINS, PEPR, PDEV, PGOV, SY
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/a9e7c58c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014